

Water Histories: Society, Conflict, and Power
Friday 1400-1715
Email: s.hege@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description:

Concerns about water access and safety are intensifying, driven by rising sea levels, droughts, and aging infrastructure. In this course, we will critically examine contemporary water crises within their historical context. By studying a variety of water formations—such as rivers, oceans, aquifers, and wetlands—we will explore how water shapes both the history of colonialism and its enduring legacies. Topics we will cover include floods, hurricanes, maritime transportation, hydroelectricity, and irrigation agriculture. We will also pose key questions, such as: How can one care for a river? Can water be owned? What are the unseen labor, infrastructure, and resources needed to make water flow?

This course provides an introduction to Global Water History, organized thematically while also adhering to a broad chronological framework. It will begin with the period of European colonial expansion and transatlantic slavery and conclude with contemporary issues such as wetland conservation and climate resilience. Throughout the course, we will draw on case studies from both the Global North and the Global South, encouraging students to synthesize a wide range of materials and develop analytical skills through comparative frameworks. While using transnational case studies means that there will not be neat and linear narratives to draw from, students will be challenged to think critically about the history of water through a more diverse set of perspectives and experiences.

Assignments:

Assignment 1, *Student Engagement* (25%): You will be expected to participate in-person during class. This means it will be important to do readings in advance and come with specific examples from the text that you are prepared to discuss. Please be respectful with your comments. Debates are welcomed, but they should be done with mindfulness to others in the class. If you are concerned about this aspect of your grade, would like to discuss expectations in further detail, or are concerned with the nature of any comments, please feel free to reach out or attend office hours.

Assignment 2, *Midterm Essay* (25%): You will be asked to write a 2,000 word reflection essay on the material from the first half of the semester. I will provide a set of prompts to help guide your reflections, but you are welcome to also devise your own inquiry. It will not be necessary to incorporate outside sources.

Assignment 3, *Berlin Water Experience* (15%): The Museum für Naturkunde has recently launched a new public digital collection, titled [Wasser.Wissen.Berlin](https://www.wasserwissen.berlin/) (Water.Knowledge.Berlin). For this assignment, you will be asked to contribute a post to their collection and write a short (2 page max) essay explaining the thinking behind your post. More information on this assignment will follow.

Assignment 4, *Memory Research Project* (35%): In lieu of a final exam, you will be asked to develop a water story. This will include identifying and researching a site of your choosing. You will then build a research project about that site. The final product can take many forms: a historical report, a policy brief, a piece of creative fiction, a podcast - this is a chance to be creative. We will take time in class to discuss this assignment and perform a series of

exercises designed to help you identify your site and build a set of meaningful questions about it.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences will not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Further unexcused absences will affect the participation grade and might also affect the Case Studies grade. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences, whether excused or unexcused. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Disability:

All photographs, images, and videos shown in class will be paired with verbal descriptions. All videos and films will be shown with captions. All assigned texts will be made accessible to screen readers to the extent possible. Please speak with me about arranging additional accommodations. More information about BCB's accessibility services can be found at the college's [accessibility webpage](#).

Readings:

All readings will be made available as pdf documents on the google class page.

A note on technology in the classroom:

You are welcome to bring laptops, tablets, and phones into class and use them during our sessions. But, let's please try to keep them from holding all of our attention and remain engaged in our discussions.

Class Schedule:

Week 1 (1/30):

Introductions, Syllabus Overview, and Concepts Overview

Week 2 (2/6):

Hydropolitics

Readings:

- Bryan Pfaffenberger, "The Harsh Facts of Hydraulics: Technology and Society in Sri Lanka's Colonization" *Technology and Culture* 31, 3 (Jul. 1990), 361-397.
- Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge Press, 2018), chapter 3 "notarizing possessions"

Week 3 (2/13):

Black Ecologies

Reading:

- J.T. Roane, "Black Ecologies, subaquatic life, and the Jim Crow enclosure of the tidewater," *Journal of Rural Studies* 94 (2022), 227-238.
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio" (1857).

- Langston Hughes, "[I've Known Rivers](#)" (1926).
- Robert Hayden, "[Middle Passage](#)" (1962).

Week 4 (2/20):

Hydraulic Infrastructures

Reading:

- [Andrea Ballesterio](#), "Casual Planetarities: Choreographies, Resonance, and the Geologic Presence of People and Aquifers" *Environmental Humanities* 15, 3 (2023): 266-283.
- Nikhil Anand, "Leaky States: Water Audits, Ignorance and the Politics of Infrastructure in Mumbai." *Public Culture* 27(2): 305-330

Week 5 (2/27):

Ice

Reading:

- Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart, *Cooling the Tropics: Ice, Indigeneity, and Hawaiiin Refreshment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), "Vice, Virtue, and Frozen Necessities in the Sovereign City" and "Making Ice Local"
- Jen Rose Smith, *Ice Geographies: The Colonial Politics of Race and Indigeneity in the Arctic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025), "Ice as Terrain"

Week 6 (3/6):

Marine Animals

Reading:

- Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coasts: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W .W . Norton, 2019), "Part I: Sea, 1848-1900"

Week 7 (3/13):

Floods, Storms, and other Disasters

Reading:

- Ricia Anne Chansky and Marci Denesiuk, editors, *Mi María: Surviving the Storm Voices from Puerto Rico* (New York: Haymarket, 2021), selections.

Week 8 (3/20): Mid-Term Essays Due

Multimodal Histories of Water

Readings:

- Watch: [Water Rising](#)

Week 9 (3/27):

Berlin Waterscapes

Reading:

- Timothy Moss, "Divided City, Divided Infrastructures: Securing Energy and Water Services in Cold War Berlin" in *Grounding Berlin: Ecologies of a Technopolis, 1871 to the Present* (Pittsburgh, 2025)

Week 10 (4/3): Spring Break

Week 11 (4/10): Berlin Water Experience Due

Swimming

Reading:

- Jessica Lee, *Turning: Lessons from Swimming Berlin's Lakes* (London: Virago Press, 2017), selections.

Week 12 (4/17):

Potential Class Visit to Spore Initiative

Week 13 (4/24):

Water Wars

Readings:

- Hannah Boast, "The Water Wars Novel" *Humanities* (2020)

Week 14 (5/1): Class Presentations

Week 15 (5/8): Class Presentations